



U.S. Department
of Transportation

**Federal Highway
Administration**

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HPD-WA/ 500

Mr. Douglas B. MacDonald
Secretary of Transportation
Department of Transportation
Olympia, Washington

Attention: Harold Peterfeso

Attention: Al King

Context Sensitive Design

Dear Mr. MacDonald:

At the request of the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) Headquarters Design Office, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) offers this letter as a clarification to the January 24, 2002, memorandum issued to the FHWA field offices by Mary Peters, FHWA Administrator.

The FHWA realizes that one of the most difficult challenges facing the highway community is providing safe, efficient transportation service that conserves, and/or enhances the environmental, scenic, historic, and community resources that are so vital to our way of life. The FHWA recognizes that there are conflicts between various stakeholders when it comes to weighing the value of each of these attributes. However, the FHWA believes that by implementing the principles of Context Sensitive Design (CSD) as part of the Environmental Stewardship and Streamlining efforts, highway designers, planners, and other community stakeholders will be able to strike a balance between providing safe and efficient highway facilities and protecting and enhancing community values.

In her memorandum Ms. Peters states: "We are in an era that calls for innovative thinking, improved coordination, cooperation, interdisciplinary decision making, streamlined implementation, and community acceptance." The CSD philosophy considers the flexibility contained in current guidance, laws, and regulations for exploring opportunities to use design as a tool to help sustain important community values without compromising safety. Context sensitive design as discussed in Ms. Peter's memorandum does not mean setting aside good design practices (including WSDOT design policies when applicable) at any cost. By using a CSD approach, ideals such as preservation of historic places, scenic and natural environment enhancement, community values, are considered along with mobility, safety, and economics.

with safety being the primary focus. Each is considered and evaluated by all stakeholders early in the project development stage to optimize the benefits from each before decisions are made.

The FHWA believes that good geometric and roadside design principles can and must play a major role in enhancing the quality of our highways and of the communities our highways traverse. A transportation facility can be an integral part of a community's fabric and can either help define the character and safety of the community or destroy it. The CSD approach to planning and designing transportation facilities will help to better understand those roles and properly address them.

The following principles were presented at the 1998 workshop, **Thinking Beyond the Pavement: A National Workshop on Integrating Highway Development With Communities and the Environment**, held in Maryland and are worth repeating:

Qualities of Excellence in Transportation Design

- The project satisfies the purpose and needs as agreed to by a full range of stakeholders. This agreement is forged in the earliest phase of the project and amended as warranted as the project develops.
- The project is a safe facility for both the user and the community.
- The project is in harmony with the community, and it preserves environmental, scenic, aesthetic, historic, and natural resource values of the area, i.e., exhibits context sensitive design.
- The project exceeds the expectations of both designers and stakeholders and achieves a level of excellence in people's minds.
- The project involves efficient and effective use of the resources (time, budget, community) of all involved parties.
- The project is designed and built with minimal disruption to the community.
- The project is seen as having added lasting value to the community.

Characteristics of the Process Contributing to Excellence

- Communication with all stakeholders is open, honest, early, and continuous.
- A multidisciplinary team is established early, with disciplines based on the needs of the specific project, and with the inclusion of the public.
- A full range of stakeholders is involved with transportation officials in the scoping phase. The purposes of the project are clearly defined, and consensus on the scope is forged before proceeding.

- The highway development process is tailored to meet the circumstances. This process should examine multiple alternatives that will result in a consensus of approach methods.
- A commitment to the process from top agency officials and local leaders is secured.
- The public involvement process, which includes informal meetings, is tailored to the project.
- The landscape, the community, and valued resources are understood before engineering design is started.
- A full range of tools for communication about project alternatives is used (e.g., visualization).

It is important that we work together with our local transportation colleagues to share ideas for safe, efficient, proactive, community-oriented designs for transportation facilities. The FHWA is asking for your support and assistance in advancing CSD as an element of Environmental Stewardship and Streamlining.

If you have questions, please contact Don Petersen, of my staff, at (360) 534-9323

Sincerely,

DANIEL M. MATHIS, P.E.
Division Administrator

Cc John Milton, WSDOT
Dick Albin, WSDOT

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